



Trilateral Working Group on Afghanistan: A Blunder in the Making?



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The third meeting of the 'Trilateral Working Group' on Afghanistan was held in Moscow on 27 December 2016, with China, Russia, and Pakistan being the participants. The earlier meetings held in Beijing and Islamabad in April 2013 and November 2013 respectively, as in the present case, did not include Afghanistan, the country whose security was purportedly being discussed or the United States (US) who had been involved in fighting in the country since 2001, though unsuccessfully. A Russian sponsored twelve nation peace conference on Afghan is on 14 April 2017 in Moscow. Reports indicate that the US and five Central Asian nations have also been invited. Hopefully the US will participate in the meeting and the Taliban will not be invited to a discussion between states lending status to the terror outfit.

Chinese and Russian Concerns

Maintaining social order in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) is probably the most significant internal problem of China related to Afghanistan. China apprehends that Afghan instability

Key Points

- The war in Afghanistan are part Al Qaeda's larger aim of 'global jihad'. It may therefore be a delusion to believe that the Taliban's aims are limited within the boundaries of Afghanistan.
- Militarily Taliban today is in a weighty position. It owes no obligation to anyone except perhaps to Pakistan. It has nothing to lose. Taliban therefore is unlikely to give up arms or merely accept a part role in the Governance of Afghanistan as a coalition partner.
- Employing one terror group to fight another, supporting, arming and financing irresponsible groups to fight a proxy war, differentiating between good and bad terror are sure recipes for disaster in the long term.
- The problem in Afghanistan is not about any dispute within the country or its people. It is about Pakistan's aims and its constant interference in the security situation in Afghanistan with a view to achieve its objectives.
- Fight against terrorism needs to be viewed as a global war and tackled globally with a multi-directional approach.

The Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS), New Delhi, is an autonomous think tank dealing with national security and conceptual aspects of land warfare, including conventional and sub-conventional conflict and terrorism. CLAWS conducts research that is futuristic and outlook and policy-oriented in approach.

and radicalism could encourage and broaden the present Uyghur unrest in Xinjiang, its western province. The Central Asian Republic (CAR) countries, neighbouring Afghanistan, houses over 3,00,000¹ citizens of Uyghur ethnicity.¹ The likelihood of Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the militant group active in China's Xinjiang province, which calls itself the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) establishing bases and operating from across the CAR supported by the Uyghur sympathizers is disturbing. The fact that several Afghan militant groups have pledged alliance to Islamic State (IS) and have also supported ETIM compounds problems of linkages and increases the possibility of non-Uyghur militants entering Xinjiang in the name of global jihad, especially after IS losing its hold in Iraq. Earlier, the *Global Times*, a tabloid by China's ruling Communist Party's official newspaper, the *People's Daily*, had reported² that about 300 Chinese members of the ETIM had travelled to Syria via Turkey and are fighting alongside the IS in Iraq and Syria.² China is also apprehensive that destabilization in Afghanistan could disrupt trade in the entire region and will have a retarding effect on its US\$ 250 billion One Belt One Road (OBOR) project.

Russian fears of Afghan militancy are reflected in the statements made by its diplomats. Speaking at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) in the last week of December 2016, Russia's ambassador to the United Nations (UN), late Vitaly Churkin, had said that³ the deteriorating security situation, has encouraged IS militants fleeing Syria and Iraq to look at Afghanistan for shelter. He said, they will eventually pose a threat to Russia through neighbouring Central Asian States. He further added:

There is also information about the presence in Afghanistan of ISIL camps and safe harbors, where people from Central Asian states and Northern Caucasus republics are being trained and where 700 terrorist families from Syria have already arrived.

Alexey Y Dedov, the Russian Ambassador to Pakistan in an exclusive interview to Radio Pakistan had said the following:

We are especially concerned about the growth of Daesh which is proliferating its influence to some northern areas of Afghanistan, which directly border territories of our allies in our brotherly Central Asian Republics.⁴

The Joint Statement of the Trilateral Working Group and Inferences

Expressing concern about the 'worsening security situation' in Afghanistan, Russia, China and Pakistan have agreed on expanding tripartite consultations on Afghanistan and have expressed the desire to have Afghanistan taking part in the discussions. The two permanent members of the UNSC, Russia and China, have confirmed their flexible approach by deciding to work towards excluding certain individuals from the world body's sanctions list as part of efforts to promote a peaceful dialogue between Kabul and the Taliban movement. The statement said:

The participants agreed to continue efforts to assist in furthering the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan, based on the key role of the Afghans themselves and in line with the principles of integrating the armed opposition into peaceful life.⁵

The Afghan branch of the IS was the only terror outfit that found a place in the joint statement whose identity and source of creation are questionable.

The statement suggests increased Russia-China cooperation in Afghanistan. Nothing was spelt out in this regard, however, there was no indication about the Afghan Taliban or the Haqqani Network, the predominant terror groups presently operating in Afghanistan which have been responsible for infusing the major part of violence in the country, resulting in casualties to both civilians and the security forces. The 'readiness for flexible approach' and the willingness of Russia and China to 'exclude certain individuals from the list of sanctioned persons' indicates the willingness of these participants to provide legitimacy to these terror groups so that they could be accommodated in some form as a part of the governing establishment in Afghanistan.

Taliban has welcomed the tripartite meeting and the proposal for delisting its members from the world body's sanction list as a positive step.⁶ But the major question is will Taliban agree to give up arms? How would it conduct itself if inducted as a coalition partner within the Afghan government? Will it be able to control the various groups within its own organization and the others who have taken up arms? Or will it build a larger terror factory in Afghanistan with ambitions across the Afghan borders?

Afghan-led Afghan-owned Peace Process

In January 2016, Afghanistan's President Ghani had asked the UNSC to impose sanctions against the Taliban chief, Haibatullah Akhundzada. The question is how could China and Russia interfere in Afghanistan's internal issues and decide on removing Taliban leaders from the UN's sanctions list on their own? Is that not the prerogative of the Afghan people and their government? These are the very elements that have been provided safe havens in Pakistan and have been responsible for the killing of thousands of innocent Afghan people and have still not given up violence.

Why was Afghanistan not included in the talks? Obviously, the discussions were to focus on issues which the participants knew will not be to the liking of Afghanistan, the war-torn country. The aim perhaps was to decide on a solution of convenience and thrust it upon Afghanistan for implementation for an Afghan-led Afghan-owned peace process.⁷

IS Presence in Afghanistan: What is the Reality?

The northern parts of Afghanistan adjoining the Central Asian Region are the strong holds of Taliban and not of Daesh. IS at present is confined to the eastern provinces of Nangarhar, Kunar, and Nuristan to some extent.⁸

There are also reports of other terror groups [Harkat-ul-Mujahideen (HuM), a Pakistan based terror group closely allied with Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)] operating camps in the eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Al Qaeda and LeT are reported to be operating several training camps in Kunar and Nuristan.⁹ There were descriptions of LeT deploying more than over 100 militants in the Kamdesh District of Nuristan Province for establishing a training camp.¹⁰ HuM and LeT are Pakistan sponsored terror groups with Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) links. The question is, are these groups been brought in and being brandished as IS?

There are also information to suggest that the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Wilayat Khorasan may be developing a regional powerbase in the north-western part of Afghanistan in the provinces of Jowzjan, Sar-e-Pul and Faryab.¹¹ In February 2017, the former Taliban militants operating in the name of IS are reported to have executed international aid workers in a prison in Jowzjan.¹² Another account which emerged on 8

February 2017, indicates that Salam Watandar, the son of a slain leader of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which had pledged support to IS in August 2015, is leading the efforts to resettle up to 650 foreign Pakistani and Uzbek militants and their families in the said provinces.¹³ Are these the 700 IS terrorist families who are said to have arrived in Afghanistan from Syria referred to by the Russian Ambassador to the UNSC?

Neither ISIS Wilayat Khorasan nor ISIS's central media has claimed the aforementioned events. Since the Uzbek and former Taliban militants who have been mentored by Pakistan and their families are involved in these incidents it is not clear if these elements are those of IS or are the consortia being brought to Afghanistan by the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan in the name of IS.

Speaking to the Senate Armed Services Committee, General Nicholson, and the US Commander in Afghanistan stated that the ISIS of Afghanistan has little to do with the core group led from Syria. Majority of them are of Pakistani and Uzbek extremists' origin who 'rebranded' themselves as members of ISIS.¹⁴ Or is it that they were 'rebranded' as IS by the ISI?

There are a few earlier communications which too link IS in Afghanistan to Pakistan's ISI. According to the Police Chief of eastern Nangarhar province Fazal Ahmad Shirzad, 'Daesh' in Afghanistan is a creation of Pakistan's ISI and 90 per cent of its fighters are from Pakistan.¹⁵ Intelligence sources who discussed the Afghanistan situation with Joseph Farah's G2 Bulletin, revealed that the funding for the ISIS in Afghanistan is coming from Pakistan's ISI.¹⁶ A US intelligence analyst in Afghanistan had informed the G2 Bulletin that, 'ISI apparently is funding all parties over here (in Afghanistan), Taliban and ISIS. Strategy policy and intelligence expert Clare M Lopez agreed with the US intelligence analyst in Afghanistan that an increasing number of Taliban are joining ISIS and the Pakistani ISI could be funding ISIS in Afghanistan.

Mistaken Assumptions

Putin's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, asserted during an interview to Anadolu Agency that Taliban is predominantly a local force and that they have 'given up the global jihadism idea. They are upset and regret that they followed Osama bin Laden.'¹⁷ Consequently, China and Russia, the two major participants seem to consider the Taliban as freedom

fighters and that their aims are limited to liberating Afghanistan, unlike the IS whose aims are global. The questions that remain unanswered, are freedom from whom? Liberate Afghanistan from whom?

The Afghan Taliban's links with Al Qaeda which includes the Mullah Omar-Osama Bin Laden relationship are well-documented. This can be clearly implicated from the eight documents recovered in Osama bin Laden's compound in May 2011 and produced as evidence in the trial of a terrorism suspect in New York.¹⁸

In December 2016, barely a few days before the Moscow meeting, a video titled 'Bond of Nation with the Mujahedeen' was released by Taliban.¹⁹ The video was shared on Taliban's websites, social media, and in the accounts of its spokesmen. The video shows Koranic passage to emphasize the Taliban's relationship with Al Qaeda. The video depicts images of Osama bin Laden and Nasir al Wuhayshi, the erstwhile emir of Al Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). An audio message from Sheikh Khalid Batarfi, an Al Qaeda veteran stationed in Yemen, praises the Taliban and indicates that Taliban did not break with Bin Laden even after the 11 September 2001 hijackings. The video includes clips of Sirajuddin Haqqani, the head of Haqqani Network, simultaneously holding the post of Taliban's Deputy Leader, praising the founding of the Taliban's Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, saying it was established to implement Allah's Sharia (Islamic law). The video shows the senior Taliban leaders rejecting peace talks and taking a vow to wage jihad until the end. The narration in the video asserts that the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan are the hope of Muslims for reviving back the honour of the Muslim Ummah (Muslim Community of the world). It goes on to state that the Afghan jihadists are the hope for tacking back the Islamic lands. One of the speaker points out that the 'Mujahedeen want to completely eliminate democracy.'

None of the themes or messages in the video indicates that the fight in Afghanistan is a 'Freedom Struggle' or the aim of Taliban has anything to do with liberating Afghanistan. There are no signs of Taliban disowning Osama Bin Laden either. The message is unambiguous. The war in Afghanistan is a part of 'Global Jihad'.

The video was released in December 2016. Had anything drastically changed in a month considering that the meeting of the Trilateral Working Group was held just a few days after the release of the video? Obviously for reasons best known to them, China and

Russia are not considering Taliban as a long-term threat to their national interest and world peace.

Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al-Qaeda leader and Osama bin Laden's successor, in his first guidelines issued for jihad had endorsed the right of militants to fight Russians in the Caucasus and the Chinese in Eastern Turkistan (Xinjiang). Writing about Pakistan, he states as follows:

In Pakistan, the struggle against them complements the fight for the liberation of Afghanistan from American occupation; then it aims at creating a safe haven for the Mujahedeen in Pakistan, which can then be used as a launching pad for the struggle of establishing an Islamic system in Pakistan.²⁰

In *Sapeeda-e-Sahar Aur Timtamata Chiragh*, the Al-Qaeda Chief Ayman al-Zawahiri further states that, 'Time is not far away when Islam will gain dominance in South Asia in general and Pakistan in particular.' It therefore follows that the first phase of Al Qaeda operations in the Afghanistan-Pakistan (AfPak) region, which is presently being waged by Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) is to weaken Pakistan and establish a militant base there to accomplish Sharia as a part of global jihad in the region.²¹

Make no mistakes. The operations of Taliban in Afghanistan are part of Al Qaeda's larger aim of global jihad. Perhaps, Taliban may be limiting their operations to Afghanistan as spreading their reach beyond Afghan borders at present is not militarily viable. Taliban's linkages with militant groups in CAR and a large proportion of militants from CAR forming part of the Taliban cannot be dismissed as without larger aims.

China and Russia probably believe that Taliban is the best shield against IS. An Islamic terror group instigated and supported to fight another Islamic terror group to protect two major powers of the world!! What they fail to see is that the foot soldiers of these terror groups and sub-groups forming part of these entities have no compulsions or qualms in switching sides. The thought process also suggests that these countries are banking on Pakistan to control Taliban and its expansion beyond Afghan borders.

Russian Aims in Afghanistan

Russians are reported to be recruiting mercenaries to fight abroad and indications are that the current recruitment drive is to cater for deployment in Afghanistan.²² Are these elements meant to fight the IS alongside the Taliban and Haqqani Network? Reports

of Russia supplying Taliban in Afghanistan are also in the air.²³ There are reports of Moscow encouraging Tajik Intelligence to facilitate shipment of Russian Arms to Taliban.²⁴ Earlier, *The Sunday Times* UK had reported in December 2015 that Putin had met late Mullah Mansour, the erstwhile Taliban Commander, over dinner at a late night meeting in a military base in Tajikistan in September, 2015.²⁵

Russia has been employing Private Military Companies (PMCs), known as '*Chastnye Voennye Kompaniy*' (ChVK).²⁶ These PMCs, founded by Dmitry Utkin, nicknamed Vagner, have become Moscow's tool for Russian military operations and related political activities abroad.²⁷ Following a bad experience of deploying troops in Afghanistan in the 1980s, Putin might have found sending mercenaries a better option of putting troops on ground with lower visibility and providing Russia the advantage of deniability. Currently, the private army fighters are reportedly being paid 700 euros per month during the training period and between 1,150 and 1,700 euros when deployed in conflict zones. Extra amount is paid for actions resulting in destruction of a tank.

The Russian aims in these exercises are not clear. Is Russia planning to put boots on ground? Is it meant to fill the vacuum created by the US' major pullout from Afghanistan? Who are they expecting to fight? It is obvious that the Taliban and the Haqqani Network do not appear to be the targets as is noticeable from the 'Trilateral Working Group' statements and the reports of Russian contacts and support to Taliban. There have also been claims that Putin is helping to re-arm the Taliban to help establish a puppet government in Afghanistan²⁸. Can the world look forward to lasting peace in Afghanistan and the region or will Russia turn Afghanistan into yet another Syria?

Points to Ponder

The Adviser to the Prime Minister on Foreign Affairs, Sartaj Aziz, while speaking at Washington's Council on Foreign Relations on 1 March 2016 had admitted that Taliban leaders live in Pakistan, putting to rest any doubt anyone may have had on Pakistan's support to Taliban.²⁹ The fact that it is in receipt of 'Coalition Support Funds' from the US in return for its support for the US' 'War on Terror' while providing safe havens to the very same militant groups fighting the US troops in Afghanistan reveals its double speak and larger aims. Pakistan's

intentions of establishing its proxy government in Afghanistan are unmistakable. Are China and Russia the major powers within the 'Trilateral Working Group' intending to allow a Pakistan's proxy government led by Taliban and Haqqani Network to take control of Afghanistan with its record and reputation of being the 'Mother of All Terrorism' in the world? Or do they have any evidences to believe that Pakistan has given up to its aims? Does one believe is it plausible that Pakistan has no role in creating supporting, funding, and arming IS in Afghanistan? Pakistan hosting seven Taliban leaders in Islamabad ahead of the multinational meeting at Moscow in April 2017 is a clear evidence of Pakistan's links with the Taliban and its possible intentions in Afghanistan.³⁰

Pakistan has not been able to control terrorism within its own territory as also the sectarian terror groups that operate from its own soil and with the establishment's knowledge and tacit approval. Jaish-e-Muhammad, a proscribed terror group, has been allowed function at will within the country. LeT, the terror group, responsible for 26/11 attack has been permitted to change its names as Jamaat ud Dawa and Falah e Insaniyat and is continuing to function within the country. Acknowledged terrorists such as Maulana Masood Azhar, Zaki-ur-Rehman-Lakhvi, Dawood Ibrahim, Syed Salahuddin, and others are moving freely within Pakistan. Under international pressure Hafiz Mohammed Saeed, the master mind behind 26/11 attack has been put under house arrest but not in jail.

Having handed over power in Afghanistan to the Taliban, how can one expect Pakistan to have any control over their activities within or beyond the boundaries of that country? Does it have the means to back roll the Taliban-led government or its activities that it decides to undertake after establishing itself in the country? What if Taliban decides to expand and go in for 'global jihad' to its neighbourhood? The consequences of bestowing de facto control of Afghanistan to Pakistan and its proxies will have to be considered, as, otherwise the prospect of the terror threat to the entire world becoming more murky and uncontrollable will become a reality.

According to the quarterly report of the *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction* (SIGAR) released on 30 January 2017, the Afghan government has uncontested control over just 57 per cent of its territory as of November 2016, as against 72 per cent a year earlier.

Taliban's Afghan campaigning season in 2017 started off with an attack on the National Directorate of Security

(NDS) office (the intelligence establishment of Afghan government) in PD 2, Lashkargah city in Helmand on 10 January 2017.³¹ Military and intelligence targets were attacked in Kabul on 1 March 2017, as security officials confirmed attacks in two areas of the city that killed at least 15 people and wounded dozens.³² Taliban captured the strategic district of Sangin in the Southern Province of Helmand on 23 March 2017. In the northern province of Baghlan, the Taliban seized control of a district centre after days of heavy fighting.³³ Strangely, no such conspicuous terror attacks or capture of territory by IS has been noted so far.

Militarily Taliban today is in a weighty position. It owes no obligation to anyone except perhaps to Pakistan. It has nothing to lose. Why would Taliban therefore agree to abandon arms or merely accept a part role in the governance of Afghanistan as a coalition partner? Do Taliban, Haqqani Network, and other affiliated militant groups accept the Constitution of Afghanistan to accomplish a power-sharing arrangement in Kabul that accommodates the Taliban in a spirit of reconciliation? Should Taliban agree to a power-sharing agreement in Kabul, then what are the guarantees that it will not appropriate complete power from within? Will such a plan bring about lasting peace in the country without any escalation or any spillover to the region?

Peace dialogue under the Trilateral Working Group and the concessions now being planned by the body is not the first of its kind. Similar initiatives have been at play to seek a political solution to the conflict in Afghanistan earlier. In an attempt to reach a peace deal, the US allowed Taliban to establish a de facto diplomatic mission in Qatar and traded five senior Taliban leaders who had been imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay for a captured US Army Sergeant. It dropped numerous preconditions that had previously held back negotiations over the future of Afghanistan. On its part, China too has hosted many Taliban delegations since 2014 and has initiated the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism (QCCM) hoping to bring peace to Afghanistan. None of these initiatives have proved fruitful. Are there any new reasons now to believe that concessions presently being planned by the Trilateral Working Group will yield results?

The US' Doha experience of trying to negotiate with the Taliban throws some light on the aims and its willingness for talks and reconciliation. The plan was for the political representatives of the Taliban to meet Afghan and the US officials in Doha to discuss

an agenda for 'peace and reconciliation'. Subsequently negotiations over the future of Afghanistan were to be led by the Afghan government.³⁴

The Taliban opened its office in Qatar on 18 June 2013, with a press conference in which two spokesmen presented their movement as a government in waiting. With the old Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan flag behind them, Sohail Shaheen, in English and Mullah Naeem, in Pashto portrayed the insurgency as a 'jihad to put an end to the occupation and form an independent Islamic system utilizing every lawful means.'

The Taliban spokesmen did duly say³⁵ that the 'Islamic Emirate never wants to pose harm to other countries from its soil, nor will it allow anyone to cause a threat to the security of countries from the soil of Afghanistan', but he also said the following:

...at world level, it considers the struggles and efforts by the miserable and oppressed nations for achievement of their legitimate rights and independence as their due rights, because people have the right to liberate their countries from colonialism and obtain their rights.

The spokesman failed to say that they supported an 'Afghan peace process'. The message is unambiguous.

Conclusion

Entrusting Afghanistan to Taliban or concluding a power sharing arrangements with Taliban will lead to yet another uncontrollable civil war resulting in chaotic conditions whose directions, effects, and outcome will be unpredictable besides posing long-term threat to the entire region.

It is time that the world understood that the problem in Afghanistan is not about any dispute within the country or its people, but about Pakistan's aims and its constant interference in the security situation in Afghanistan with its own aims directing all its actions.

Afghanistan should not be viewed as a venue for fighting a proxy war by the major powers of the world, namely, China, the US, and Russia. The Afghans have shed enough blood in this war of power games in the last three decades, and it is time the world assumes responsibility to bring about peace in the country and prevent expansion of terror beyond Afghan borders. Terrorism is a global menace and it cannot be defeated or least of all wound down by individual countries or through regional efforts. Fight against terrorism needs to be viewed as a global war and need to be tackled

globally with a multi-directional approach. Employing one terror group to fight another, supporting, arming and financing irresponsible groups to fight a proxy war, differentiating between good and bad terrors are sure recipes for disaster in the long-term. Terror groups have no forebodings in shifting sides or striking at the creator. Terrorism based on extremist religious misconceptions has no boundaries or rules of fighting. In as far as Afghanistan is concerned the major powers of the world need to work together than against one another in their own interest and in the interest of the world.

The solution to Afghanistan's problem perhaps lies in forcing Pakistan to stop interfering in Afghan affairs and shed its links with all terror groups including those operating in Afghanistan without any discrimination. Taliban will have to be starved of all supplies including war like stores and funds and militarily contained by carrying out operations with boots on ground. Such operations must have the sanction of the world body with all major powers participating. Use of air arm needs strict control, to reduce damage and sufferings to the Afghan people. However, there are no options but for the major powers and the countries of the region to come together and cooperate in a constructive way shedding their rivalry and geo-political ambitions. There is need to initiate action to end opium production and trade by Taliban especially in areas controlled by Taliban. Talks could thereafter be initiated under the UN from a position of military and moral strength to accomplish lasting peace to the troubled country.

Being global in nature, terrorism will have to be confronted simultaneously in all similarly affected countries in the world to first arrest its spread and then to eliminate it completely. Necessary rules and conventions will have to be formulated to control funds and weapons flow to terror groups while ensuring that boundaries of nations are not breached and human rights are respected. Terrorism as a means of war fighting and use of non-military force to fight proxy wars will have to end.

Terrorism is global and needs a global approach.

Notes

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